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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 004981

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH FORMER PM BANHARN  
SILAPA-ARCHA

REF: BANGKOK 4905 (FOR THE MOTHERLAND)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[¶1.](#) (C) In a September 14 meeting with the Ambassador, former Prime Minister Banharn Silapa-Archa predicted that loyalists of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin would not be able to form a government after the next elections unless they were to win an absolute majority. Banharn cited assurances he had received from politicians forming new parties that they would not support the People's Power Party, which represents Thaksin's interests. Banharn said Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva had the necessary skills to become Prime Minister, despite his relative inexperience. He speculated that current Army Commander General Sonthi Boonyaratglin could become Deputy Prime Minister and/or Defense Minister in the next government; the Ambassador said this appointment would send the wrong signal. Banharn was clearly energized and appeared in his element, amid uncertainty and fast-breaking political machinations. End Summary.

EX-TRT OFFICIALS CONSOLIDATE

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[¶2.](#) (C) The Ambassador called on Chart Thai Party Leader Banharn Silapa-Archa at Chart Thai headquarters on September [¶14.](#) (Note: Banharn, who was Prime Minister from 1995-1996, remains active in party politics and is currently an important ally of the Democrat Party. Chart Thai appears likely to represent a key swing vote when it comes time to form the next government. End Note.) Banharn appeared energized as he noted the fast pace of his fellow politicians' maneuvers.

[¶3.](#) (C) Banharn reviewed the consolidation of former Thai Rak Thai officials into a manageable number of blocs. On September 11, several important figures merged to form a party to be called "For the Motherland" (reftel). Then, on September 13, Suwat Liptapanlop and Somkid Jatusripitak -- both of whom remain ineligible to hold political office because of the Constitutional Tribunal's dissolution of TRT -- agreed to combine forces and create a new party,

tentatively called "Thai Unity/Developing Nation." Banharn noted that this unwieldy amalgamation of the names of Somkid and Suwat's groups reflected politicians' unwillingness to appear to sacrifice the symbols of their personal status, even as they scrambled clumsily to negotiate new arrangements in an effort to preserve their relevance.

#### ASSESSING PPP

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14. (C) The two aforementioned groupings, along with the People's Power Party (PPP), appear to provide political space for most of the prominent figures formerly associated with TRT. Banharn confirmed the conventional view that PPP clearly represented Thaksin; he said Thaksin, in designating Samak Sundaravej as PPP Party Leader, had chosen a capable figure, but Samak was blunt in his manner, and this could get him into trouble. Samak also remained vulnerable to corruption charges currently being investigated by the Asset Examination Commission (AEC). Banharn said he did not want to speak ill of Samak, whom he considered a friend, but he felt Samak, in supporting Thaksin, was going down the wrong path.

15. (C) Banharn said he did not believe PPP could expect to receive the support of the same 42 percent of the country that had voted to reject the Constitution in the August referendum. He noted that Thaksin loyalists had made significant efforts to rally opposition to the charter, with the government and Council for National Security doing much less to generate support. During the election, on the other hand, other parties would be competing more fiercely with Thaksin's forces. With his assets and his family's liberty

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at stake, Thaksin would fight aggressively, Banharn predicted, saying he would do the same were he in Thaksin's place.

16. (C) The Ambassador asked what Banharn expected in the event that PPP were to win a plurality in the coming election. Banharn asserted with great confidence that, so long as PPP did not win an absolute majority, it would be unable to form a government, because no other parties would join in support of Thaksin. He said he had received assurances to this effect from key former TRT figures in the other groups, including Surakiart Suthirathai, Suwat Liptapanlop, and Suwit Khunkitti. Clearly reflecting a view that the coming contest had more at stake than just the personal interests of politicians, Banharn said that if these politicians were to go back on their word, he would consider them "inhuman."

#### ABHISIT AS PM

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17. (C) Banharn expressed a reasonable degree of confidence in Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva's capability to function as Prime Minister. (Abhisit, who recently turned 43, is frequently criticized as too young for the job.) Banharn admitted that Abhisit lacked experience, but -- aside from himself, Banharn half-joked -- there were few people in the arena who appeared more qualified. Whoever would become the next Prime Minister would face numerous difficulties, Banharn said.

#### SONTHI IN THE CABINET

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18. (C) With General Sonthi Boonyaratglin continuing to publicly vacillate about possibly running for elected office, the Ambassador asked Banharn's view of Sonthi and his political future. Banharn predicted that Sonthi would likely end up Minister of Defense, and possibly also Deputy Prime Minister, after the formation of the next government. The Ambassador said Sonthi's appointment to the cabinet would be

a negative development, as it would make it appear the 2006 coup d'etat was motivated at least in part by Sonthi's political ambitions.

#### CONSTITUTION AND ELECTION

¶9. (C) Banharn said he believed the Election Commission would act impartially. He worried, however, that the election-related "organic" laws currently under debate in the parliament would prove overly strict, and, as Party Leader, he could be vulnerable to legal charges arising from the actions of subordinates. Banharn noted that the 2007 Constitution and the system of governance it had established seemed designed principally to prevent Thaksin's return to power; these would likely require modification by the next parliament.

#### COMMENT

¶10. (C) Banharn's seemed to concede that PPP is likely to place first in the coming election; this is the current conventional wisdom in political circles. The other parties' current game plan is not to overtake PPP but to maintain sufficient cohesion and discipline that PPP will prove unable to form a government, despite a plurality. While Banharn seemed to find some credibility in assurances that former TRT figures would not return to Thaksin's side, we believe that few unbreakable commitments have been made, and top-level negotiations will continue to be characterized by equivocation, mistrust, and back-stabbing, up to and beyond the day of the vote.

BOYCE